

Watchwords by Officer Tom Hanshaw
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Shoplifting is likely the most common retail crime affecting business owners today. It can cost a business thousands of dollars, which also has an effect on consumers through higher prices. There is no profile to identify a suspect, as they can be male, female, older or younger and target any business. Contrary to popular belief, many perpetrators are not stealing due to the economic times but because of a compulsive disorder, personal habit or peer-pressure. It may seem overwhelming and frustrating to business owners but there are a few ways to deter the crime.

Prevention is important in addressing any crime, especially shoplifting. Retail businesses should utilize more secure displays, mirrors, cameras, the location of the cash register and of course, employees to deter the crime. Signs and decals that advertise video surveillance within the store as well as a policy to prosecute shoplifters also help. Paying attention to customers inside the store can be difficult because of staffing but is necessary to slow the crime. Unfortunately, a thief may try to steal anything so never assume particular merchandise will not be a target.

Preventing crime without inconveniencing customers can be tricky, as you don't want to scare potential business away. Small and expensive merchandise should be monitored closely and racks kept away from store exits to prevent the "grab and go technique." Locked cases also work well but assure someone with a key is handy for interested customers. Monitor your inventory closely in case there is a problem, such as chronic suspect. Consider greeting customers as they enter, not to become a pushy salesperson but as a way to offer assistance.

Managers should train employees to watch for warning signs, such as inappropriate clothing, oversized bags or even a stroller. Pay attention to someone who is acting nervous, scanning the store frequently or watching employees closely. Be aware of the tactics sometimes used, such as a team of thieves who distract an employee or a suspect who waits until the employee is busy with a legitimate customer. Know the "blind spots" inside the store, where a suspect could go to conceal merchandise. Employees should also adopt the practice of checking unsealed merchandise, for hidden items. They should also be familiar with store pricing, to guard against sticker changing.

If you suspect someone has committed shoplifting, ask him or her to step away from other customers, notify police or store security and confirm a crime has occurred. If the suspect refuses or becomes disruptive, do not risk your safety or the safety of employees and customers, nothing in your business is worth being injured for. Obtain a good description of the suspect, provide any video or physical evidence to police and watch where the person goes. A registration number of a vehicle, if involved, is an excellent lead for investigators. Take the crime seriously and discuss prevention and reporting steps with employees on a regular basis. If you are a customer and witness an act, report the crime to an employee. After all, shoplifting is a crime that truly costs everyone.

As I sit down to type this week's column on February 4th, the long-range weather forecast is calling for a "significant" storm on the 11th. So as you're reading this, you may be taking a break from snow removal. The past month or so surely has been a challenge for even hearty New Englanders but alas Spring Training for the Red Sox is almost in sight. Until the weather does finally break, motorists are urged to be very cautious, reduce speed and display some courtesy. It is very difficult to navigate corners and many side streets so it takes cooperation to get through. Be aware of pedestrians, especially children, who are forced to walk along the roadway. We are on a record-breaking snowfall pace and it's possible the next several weeks will also present challenges. Take your time and limit distractions, such as cell phone use when driving, because driving around the area now demands your full attention.